The Radicalism of the American Revolution: Possibilities and Limits



The Challenge to the Old Order

- Resistance to British rule had involved more Americans in politics than ever before.
  - What role would these Americans have in politics in the new nation?
- Americans rejected monarchy and aristocracy.
  - Could this rejection be extended to other hierarchies?
- Rhetoric became more radical over time.
  - What was the relationship between liberty and equality?
  - Who should be free and equal?
  - To what areas of life should this freedom extend?
- The formation of new governments opened the room for debate.
  - Who had a right to contribute to these debates?
  - How could Americans ensure these governments were seen as legitimate?

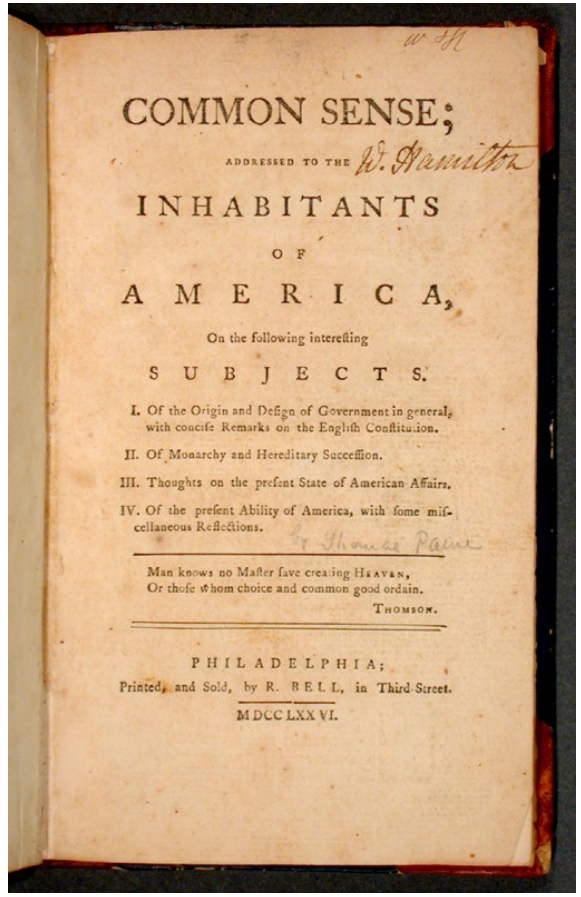
Writing Constitutions

- The old governments had been destroyed and the states needed new governments.
- The revolutionaries agreed that the governments must be “republican.”
- All agreed a republican government
  - Was grounded in the consent of the “people”
    - Who are “the people”?
  - Had no king nor an aristocracy
  - Served the “public good”
- This process varied from state to state.

What is a Constitution?

Pennsylvania's Radical Revolution

- The Pennsylvania Constitution of 1776
  - Institutionalized a radically democratic government
  - A one-house legislature elected annually
  - All men over 21 who paid any taxes could vote
  - Abolished the office of governor
  - Established public schools
  - Guaranteed "freedom of speech, and of writing," the right to abolish and recreate the government, and religious liberty
  - Subordinated the government to the unitary will of "the people"



COMMON SENSE;

ADDRESSED TO THE INHABITANTS OF AMERICA,

On the following intereſting

SUBJECTS.

I. Of the Origin and Deſign of Government in general, with concife Remarks on the Engliſh Conſtitution.

II. Of Monarchy and Hereditary Succeſſion.

III. Thoughts on the preſent State of American Affairs.

IV. Of the preſent Ability of America, with ſome miſcellaneous Reflections.

Man knows no Maſter ſave creating HEAVEN,
Or thoſe whom choice and common good ordain.
THOMSON.

PHILADELPHIA;
Printed, and Sold, by R. BELL, in Third-Street.
MDCCLXXVI.

The Pennsylvania Constitution was influenced by *Common Sense*.

The “Conservative” Approach

- John Adams’ *Thoughts on Government* (1776)
  - Diverse views exist in society that need to be “balanced”
  - Two houses in the legislature
    - The upper house (representing the wealthy)
    - The lower house (representing “the people”)
  - A powerful governor and powerful courts to resolve conflicts
- Conservatives saw the British government as a (defective) model



The Revolutionary State Constitutions

- Most states created Constitutions between the radical and conservative models
  - The Legislature
    - Eleven (of fourteen) had two chambers
    - Three had one
    - Most had one-year terms for the legislature (legislators should be more directly beholden to “the people”)
  - The Governor
    - Only Massachusetts had a strong governor
    - All the rest (except Pennsylvania which had no governor) had weak governors (limited or no veto power)

The Right to Vote

- Conservatives supported continued property qualifications.
  - Only those with a stake in society should vote.

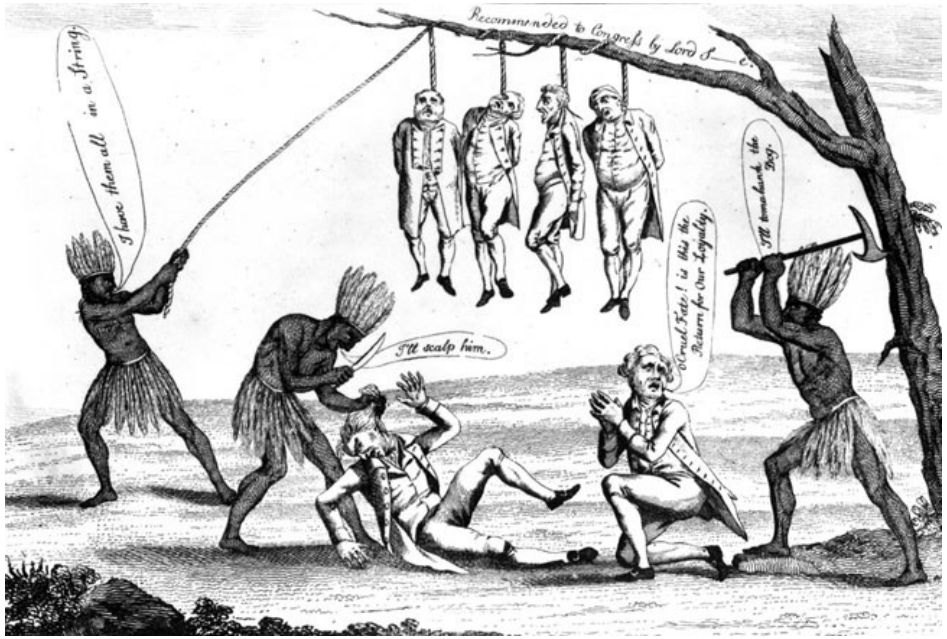
- Radicals supported universal suffrage (for all men or white men).
  - According to them, voting
    - Was an inherent part of liberty.

    - Would make society more equal.

- The right to vote expanded but property qualifications remained in most states.

Ambivalent Experiences

- Loyalists
- Women
- The poor
- Native Americans
- African-Americans



British cartoon meant to portray American treatment of loyalists

The Next 100 Years of Native American Life



White Settlement in the 1780s

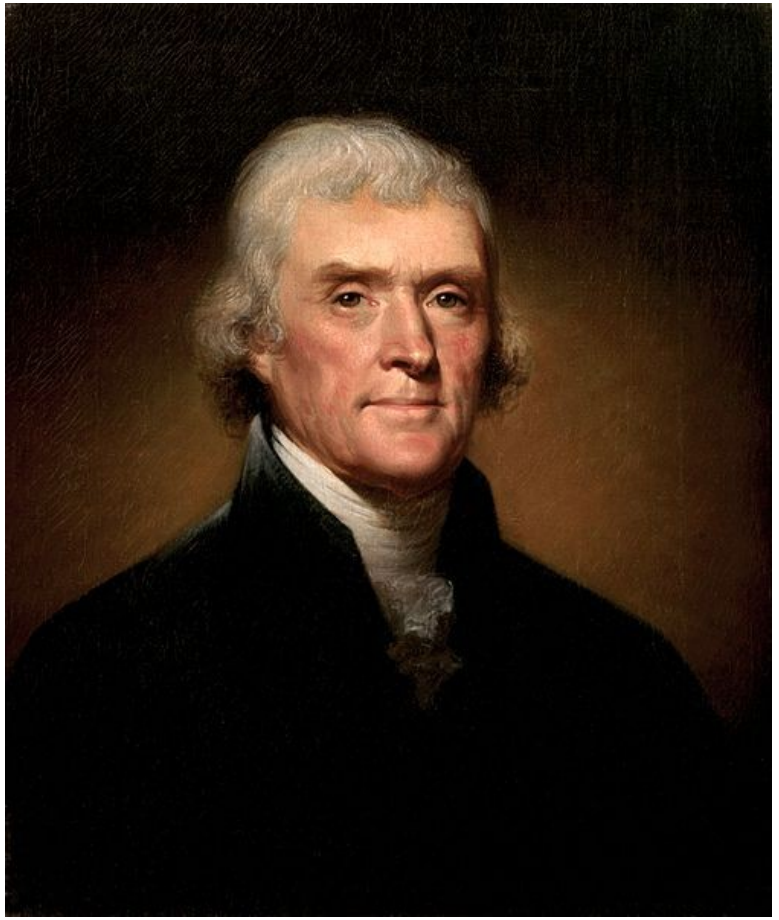


Indian reservations in the late 1800s

Slavery and the Revolution



Sketch of American soldiers at Yorktown, 1781



Thomas Jefferson

Slavery and Revolutionary Ideas

"We hold these truths to be self-evidence, that **all men** are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness?"

- The contradictions between revolutionary rhetoric and slavery were obvious.
- More white Americans than ever before began to question the morality of slavery.
- Slaves themselves deployed revolutionary rhetoric.

African-Americans and the Patriot Side

- The dynamics of war challenged slavery.
- Early in the war most white Americans resisted enlisting black soldiers.
- African-Americans were ultimately incorporated into the American army and militias.
  - Many units were integrated.
  - Free blacks enlisted freely.
  - Slaves served as substitutes for their owners.
  - Slaves enlisted with the promise of emancipation.
  - Around 5,000 African-Americans served.



Sketch of American soldiers at Yorktown, 1781

African-Americans and Britain

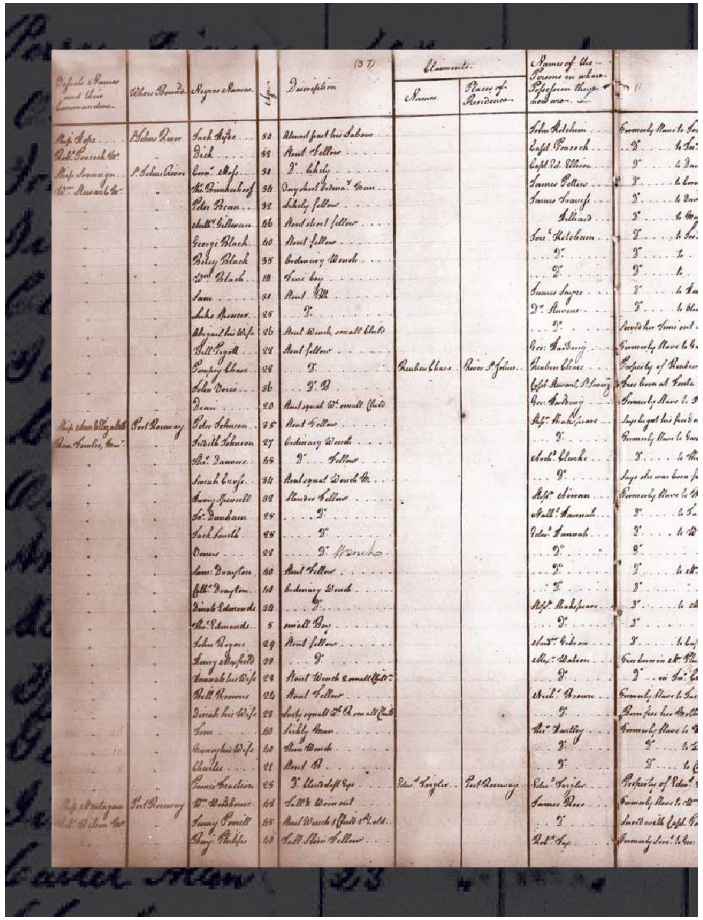
- The British military used slaves' discontent as a tactic to undermine the Revolution.
  - Slaves were a potential source of manpower.
  - Appeals to slaves might frighten colonists
- Lord Dunmore's Proclamation of 1775
  - Issued by John Murray, 4th Early of Dunmore and Royal Governor of Virginia
  - Promised freedom to any servants and slaves willing and able to fight
  - Largely ineffective
  - Set a precedent for similar actions



Lord Dunmore, the last royal governor of Virginia

The Results of the British Challenge

- Between 80,000 and 100,000 slaves fled during the war
  - Collapse of many plantations
  - Treated ambivalently by the British
- Thousands of slaves became free
  - The evacuation of New York
    - 1,000s of slaves had flocked there
    - The British commander refused to return the slaves to the Americans
    - Many slaves evacuated with the British and went to Nova Scotia, Sierra Leone, and London



The Book of Negroes, 1783

Slavery after the War

- Many Americans agreed that slavery was immoral, contrary to revolutionary ideology, and harmful to the nation.
- All states banned the slave trade (South Carolina reopened it later).
- The northern states began to abolish slavery.
  - Why would it have been “easy” for the North to abolish slavery?
  - A few abolished it outright: Vermont and Massachusetts
  - Most instituted “gradual emancipation.”

Gradual Emancipation

- Gradual emancipation plans usually meant that
  - No living slave would be freed.
  - The children of those slaves would be freed.
  - Usually, those children would serve their mother’s master until around age 30.
- As a result, slavery died a slow death in the North.
  - Pennsylvania abolished slavery in 1780, but the last slave died in 1845.
  - New Jersey abolished slavery in 1804, but 18 elderly slaves still lived there in 1860
  - Even where slavery was relatively unimportant it was difficult to end.

Slavery Persists

- In the south, slavery did not die
  - Many southerners appear to have accepted the anti-slavery consensus.
  - Many southerners voluntarily emancipated their slaves.
  - No state south of Pennsylvania abolished slavery.
  - Why?
    - Social inertia
    - Economic importance
    - Racism
    - Fear



Slave and free states in 1789